The Johnson Legacy

By R. W Tall, Jr.

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For more than three decades I had to good fortune to travel the U.S. to help nonprofit organizations raise the capital needed to make new additions to their facilities or to build entirely new ones. The best part of the job was to work closely with some of the most remarkable people I've ever known. I learned this trade while working at Middlebury College. My boss was Walter Brooker, a dear friend and mentor. Recruited by President Sam Stratton to become Middlebury's first VP of Development in the mid-1950s, he was a terrific storyteller and writer. Despite the frequent urging by his colleagues, he rarely put them to pen. One of my favorites appears below.

In 1962 the "Battells" was a dormitory with only one payphone on each corridor. The father of one first-year student, his only child, had died, and her mother was not able to reach her. In desperation she called the Dean of Women, Elizabeth "Ma" Kelly. Dean Kelly reassured the mother that she'd take care of the notification. "That's my job." Upon arriving at the dorm Mrs. Kelly realized that the student was understandably distraught; so, she helped her pack a suitcase, then drove her to Burlington Airport for the flight home.

Invited to speak at the father's funeral was his business partner of many years Arnold LaForce. At the reception which followed he was introduced to the daughter for the very first time. "And what are you doing these days?" he inquired. "I'm a student at Middlebury College." LaForce was shocked. In all the years of working side-by-side, he never knew his friend had a family, let alone someone at the College on whose Board he sat. Their business week was Monday through Thursday. You might ask why? Turns out his partner's family had lived next door to the Lindbergh's when their baby was kidnapped. He and his wife vowed never to reveal anything about their personal life.

Four years later, the phone rang in Dean Kelly's office. "Mrs. Kelly, I've never forgotten the many kindnesses you extended to our family. Julie tells me Middlebury needs an art center. Build anything you want so long as there is red wall-to-wall carpeting and a grand or baby-grand piano in each room. In 1968, the Christian A. Johnson Memorial Building was dedicated. Tom Hoving, Head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was the featured speaker.

Upon his retirement from the College, Walt became a consultant to Julie Johnson Kidd as she developed the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation which has been quite generous to the College.

Since Middlebury's current Art Department Chair, Arthur K.D. Healy was retiring, President Armstrong reached out to his Alma Mater, Princeton, to recruit one of its faculty, art historian, A. Richard Turner, to fill his shoes. Bob Reiff, art historian, was the only other permanent member of the department beside Healy at the time of the construction of the building. Turner hired David Bumbeck and Bruce Muirhead for studios and my wife Carol (Cary) Armstrong Tall as assistant for intro course discussion sections, then hired John Hunisak and Glenn Andres as full-time art historians in 1970. Cary also was the Johnson Art Gallery's first curator. Student enrollment in art courses soared. One future artist of note was Woody Jackson.

The Art Department and its studios occupied the north end of Johnson. The Music Department, complete with a Gress-Miles organ, installed with only a 16th inch margin, occupied the south. Its faculty, including George Todd and Emory Fanning, also witnessed a surge in student popularity once Jonson was completed.